DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 210 625 CS 006 362

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TITLE Urban Secondary School Students Evaluate Their Reading Program.
PUB DATE Apr 81
NOTE 27p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the New York State English Council (31st, Grossinger, NY, October 18-21, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Junior High Schools; Junior High School Students; *Program Content; Program Development; Questionnaires; *Reading Attitudes; *Reading Instruction; *Reading Programs; *Remedial Reading; Student Evaluation of Teacher Performance; Student Needs; Urban Education

ABSTRACT

In order to structure reading class activities that would motivate secondary school students, a questionnaire was developed and administered to students in two urban junior high school reading programs. The questionnaire elicited student opinions about the reading class activities they liked and disliked, their reading skills, the materials they preferred to read, and the kinds of help they thought they needed to become better readers. The results showed that students wanted to learn to read faster with comprehension, to read harder books, and to expand their vocabularies. They preferred to read short stories, workbooks, short books, and puzzles, and wanted more library materials in the classroom, including more game books, plays, poetry books, and newspapers. Their preferred reading class activities were reading, using nonprint media for reading, and developing vocabulary, while the least liked activities were writing, answering questions every time after reading, and listening to the teacher for long periods of time. (FL)

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URBAN SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS EVALUATE THEIR READING PROGRAM

by

Dr. Clara Franklin Alexander

April, 1981

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BACKGROUND

At present, I am the English Coordinator in the Humanities Division and the Director of the Reading Laboratory. You probably wonder why I would present a paper about secondary school students - particularly junior high school students I had been on leave from the Board of Education for several years and was asked to make a decision - to return to the Board or to resign. Since the economy is the way it is, I went back and was assigned to Junior High School 265 as the school Reading Coordinator. JHS 265 serves a fairly stable community of low-rent public housing projects in a low SES section of Brooklyn. The population is Black and Hispanic. As of February, 1981, 34% of the students tested scored at or above grade level on the New York City Reading Test and the school ranks 130th of 182 junior high schools in the City. The program was structured so that all students who scored below grade level on the New York City Reading Test were assigned to reading classes. A large group of 30 students met once each week with a reading teacher. The group was then divided into halves for the remaining periods. Half went to another reading teacher and half returned to work with the 'home room' reading teacher for instruction three additional days each week. The principal had devised this system in an attempt to structure smaller learning groups while using additional reading teachers who had been provided for by a Special Needs Fund. This arrangement

required cooperative planning so there would be maximum articulation between the teachers of the students who had two different reading teachers. A residual benefit of this cooperative planning was that it also served as a type of faculty development program in that each teacher learned from the others. I had felt some concern about this unusual arrangement because there had been a few problems related to the structure during the year. I decided to assess the students as well as the teachers to ascertain their ideas for improvement of the reading program. The areas which I will discuss here are:

1. the skill objectives of the program
2. the materials, activities, and methods used
3. the elements needed for possible improvement of the program

A questionnaire was developed and administered to each group - students and reading teachers.

I. SKILLS EMPHASIZED OR WANTED IN THE READING PROGRAM

STUDENTS

1.1 LEARNED: How to understand what they read (43%)

Lots of new words (23%)

1.2 WANTED TO LEARN:

Speed reading (18%)

Vocabulary - "More words,"

(More about big words" (21%)

seventeen percent still felt that they needed to continue learning how to understand what they read, how to remember what they read, and how to read harder books.

2. MATERIALS, ACTIVITIES, METHODS WHICH WERE LIKED BEST IN THE PROGRAM

2.1 MATERIALS

Most students responded that they liked SRA Kits, the "We are Black" kit, true stories about people, biographies, and sports workbooks, plays, and rexo and mimeo sheets, mysteries.

2.2 ACTIVITIES

Students liked best - you could never guess - vocabulary.

A runaway favorite.

2.3 ACTIVITY WHICH STUDENTS LIKED LEAST

Students did not like the type of book reports which had to be written. Other responses (quoted) "reading books I don't like"; "talking instead of reading".

2.4 MATERIALS AND ACTIVITIES YOU WISH WE HAD AND COULD DO IN READING CLASS

STUDENTS

Responses were varied but the most frequently occurring responses are grouped here:

a. students wanted more difficult books to read: "Hard readers," "10th grade reading materials," "materials that will get your grades up," "mystery stories make you think harder."

b. Many wanted work independently: 11% wanted "individual" reading materials. I don't know if they meant individualized or not. It seems that they simply like to work at their own pace or rate. "More independent, exciting reading games."

c. Many wanted books to take home and read.

d. Several students wanted more vocabulary work.

3. ELEMENTS NEEDED AND RECOMMENDED FOR THE IMPROVEMENT OF THE READING PROGRAM

3.1 More books

3.2 More varieties of books

3.3 Greater variety of activities such as games

3.4 Children who don't want to learn should be ignored

3.5 Give commendations at the end of the class

3.6 have a speed reading program

3.7 Books to take home to read

3.8 More vocabulary work

3.9 Take trips to other schools "and learn their way of reading"

3.10 Library trips

Recently, the principal of another JHS school in the same Brooklyn district (but a different community) asked me to survey her reading students so that she could determine the interests, preferred activities and materials, and recommendations of the 7th, 8th, and 9th graders who participated in the schools' remedial reading program.

This particular administrator has done much to improve this school. At one time this school had been considered to be the worst junior high school in the district. As of February, 1981, this school ranks 96 (out of 182 in the City), and 37.9% of its students scored at or above grade level on the New York City Reading Test. This ranking at least puts the school in the top half. This all-minority, over-ninety-seven percent Black school is located in the heart of the Bedfore-Stuyvesant area of Brooklyn. Most parents who have any resources at all do not sent their children to this junior high school. The principal and her Reading Coordinator are anxious to do whatever they can to continue improving the school's remedial reading program even more are anxious to incorporate the results of this questionnaire in their planning sessions.

The Reading Coordinator of the school distributed my questionnaire and received 172 responses. Most of the respondents (118) were 7th graders (68.6%). Fifty-one were 8th graders (29.6%). Only one was a ninth grader and two did not indicate their grades. The sexes were about evenly represented - 85 males and 86 females. One child did not indicate his/her sex.

METHODOLOGY AND CLASS ACTIVITIES

One of the big questions of course is, What do children in this difficult age group enjoy doing in reading class and what do they abhor? The aim of the administrators of this JHS is to structure class activities so that students will be motivated to learn. The purpose of this questionnaire is to determine what students think of their reading program and to find out what they think they would like to do to help themselves become better readers. I tried to assess the students' preferences for methodology by asking:

"Which kind of reading class do you like best?

a. the kind in which you have to talk about what you read

b. the kind in which you don't talk - you just read

One hundred and twenty-six (126) and (73.3%) indicated a preference for the kind in which you talk about what you read.

Forty-six and (26.5%) preferred the kind in which you don't talk.

Students were asked, "When you answer questions you have read, which do you like best?

a. to write your answers

b. to tell your answers

Eighty-nine students (51.7%) preferred to write

Eighty-three students (48.3%) preferred to tell

Respondents indicated that in reading class they are generally required to answer questions after they have read a story. I also wanted to determine whether students asked their OWN questions about passages. Most indicated that they generally ask their own questions after they have read a story if there is something which they do not understand.

	Must answer Questions		Ask Questions if they don't Understand	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Never	2	1.2%	2	1.2%
Once in a while	7	4%	20	11.6%
Sometimes	30	17.4%	53	30.8%
Most of the time	64	37.2%	47	27.3%
Every time	68.	39.5%	41	23.8%
No response	1	.6%	9	5.2%

I regret that I was not present when students responded to the question, "Even though you are older now, would you like to have someone read stories to you just for fun?". One hundred and sixty-seven (167) responded. Seventy-two (43%) said "Yes" and 41 (25%) responded, "Maybe." Fifty-four (32%) responded "No." A random check of 124 of these responses by sex showed that fewer males were willing to be read to. Sixteen percent said "Yes," 11% said "Maybe", and 21% said "No" while 23% of the female respondents said "yes," 16% said "Maybe," and 13% said "No."

SKILLS

Students were given a list of skills and asked to check the TWO skills which they are learning most in their reading classes:

40.2% checked "How to understand what you read"

19.2% checked "How to read hard words and new words"

17.1% checked "How to read faster" (they were preparing for the 1981 reading test when this questionnaire was administered)

15% checked "How to remember what they read".

Next, students were asked to write in the one skill which they WISH they could learn in reading class. Responses were open-ended so they were grouped under three categories:

1. LEARN TO IMPROVE MY READING

   Forty-seven students (27%) want to learn to read better. Some specified by learning to read harder books, by learning to read more and better, by learning how to draw conclusions, by learning how to read a lot, or by learning how to understand.

2. The next skill which many students want is to learn how to READ QUICKLY WITH COMPREHENSION (23 - 13%).

3. The skill category to which the next largest group responded was LEARNING VOCABULARY WORDS. Nineteen (11%) students want to expand their vocabularies.

   The above cited are the three skill groups which most students indicated. Miscellaneous skills were

SKILLS	STUDENTS
Spelling	6
Writing - their own books	3
Writing to improve skills	3
Research	3
Sex education	4
How to learn better	1

SKILLS	STUDENTS
How to read without moving my head	1
French	1
Biology	1

READING MATERIALS

Students were asked to indicate which two kinds of reading materials they like BEST.

In order of frequency of response, they are -

Short stories	64	(18.8%)
Textbooks (readers)	57	(16.7%)
Workbooks	54	(15.8%)
Short books	45	(13.2%)
Puzzles	35	(10.3%)
Whole books	24	(7.0%)
Boxes and kits	23	(6.7%)
Plays	21	(6.2%)
Poetry	18	(5.3%)

Students were next asked to select two kinds of reading materials which they WISH they had in reading class. In order of frequency they were:

Library books	81	(24.0%)
Game books	60	(18.4%)
10th grade grading materials	56	(17.2%)
Readers	50	(15.3%)
Plays	36	(11.0%)
Poetry	31	(9.5%)

Students were asked if they would like to read newspapers and magazines in reading class. Their responses were:

23 (13.4%)	No
60 (34.9%)	Maybe
86 (50.0%)	Yes
3 (1.7%)	No response

In an attempt to give the school reading coordinator and the principal a clearer picture of the respondents and their preferences, I posed the question: "What is the name of the best book or the best story you ever read?" and "Who is your best book heroine or hero?". Responses were so varied that it was impossible to group most of them. Those book or story titles which appeared more than once are:

	Number of Students
Are you There, God? It's me, Margaret	9
Tom Sawyer	4
Robin Hood	2
Freaky Friday	2
Pippi Longstockings	2
Which Way Is Up	2
The Nitty Gritty	2
Greek Myths and Tales	2

Individual responses ranged from "Little Red Riding Hood" to The Invisible Man and Mommy Dearest: from Charlotte's Web to Gone With the Wind; from "The Three Little Pigs" to The Godfather.

Heroes and Heroines, in order of frequency are:

Superman	13
Wonder Woman	11
Flash (Gordon?)	6
Margaret	5
Tom Sawyer	4
Martin Luther King, Jr.	4

The balance, of course, were again, highly individual - from Jesus and Mary to Rometheus and Hercules; from Pippi to John Henry and Casey Jones; from Batman to Mary McLeod Bethune.

Finally, students were asked to indicate what they like to do BEST in their reading class and what they HATE to do in reading class. These two questions were open-ended so respondents were free to indicate THEIR feelings. Responses to the two questions have been grouped as much as possible.

"What activities do you like BEST?"

1. To READ (just reading in general, mysteries, books) 61

2. To use equipment other than books (non-print media). "Reading from Projector," "Tapes", "Puzzles," "Controlled Readers," "Aud-X, Tach-X". 20

3. Interaction

With print/teacher/classmates:

a.	read and answer questions	17	
b.	answer questions	2	
c.	read and talk about it	12	
d.	read and write answers	12	
e.	read my writing	1	
f.	read stories together	2	
g.	work	11	Total: 57

4. Other

Vocabulary 2

Total: 140

ACTIVITIES

Students' responses to the question

"WHAT ACTIVITIES DO YOU HATE?" Follow:

1. Nothing 29

2. Reading Activities

a.	Reading from projector	6
b.	reading in general	3
c.	using Tach-X	3
d.	not reading	2
e.	reading questions out loud	2

Total 16

3. Writing Activities

a.	writing all of the time	7
b.	writing (in general)	16
c.	writing answers on paper	1
d.	copying from the board	1
e.	copying the objective	5
f.	writing book reports	3
g.	work	6

Total 40

4. OTHER

a.	answering questions every time after reading	9
b.	homework	1
c.	listening to the teacher talking for long periods of time	10
d.	not participating (being quiet all the time or sitting in seat and doing nothing	5
e.	looking up words in the dictionary	5

Total 30

Total responses 115

CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS

The aim of this report is to share the results of these student surveys and to make some recommendations for reading program components for secondary school remedial readers based on these assessments. A summary of my observations of the students' perceptions follows:

Students want to learn how to read faster with comprehension.

Students want to learn how to read 'harder' books.

Students want to expand their vocabularies.

The best-liked materials are short stories, textbook readers (which also contain short stories), workbooks, short books, and puzzles.

Materials students wish they had are:

Library books in the reading class

10th grade reading materials (requested by 7th and 8th graders who read below grade level)

Game books

Readers

Plays

Poetry

Newspapers

The best-liked reading class activities are reading - anything, using non-print media for reading, and developing vocabulary.

The most hated reading class activities are:

writing - particularly 'automatic' types of activities
read/write answers
read/write book report
read/copy from board
answering questions every time after reading
listening to the teacher talking for long periods of time

Reading skills which students wish they had are:

Strong reading ability

Ability to read quickly with comprehension

Skill to acquire a large vocabulary

Forty (23%) students in the second survey indicated an aversion to some type of writing activity. In analyzing the responses closely, however, it can be concluded that the students who regard writing activities as anathema are possibly fearful of the writing process. However, they are also possibly b-o-r-e-d: bored with writing all of the time, writing answers on paper, copying from the board, copying the objectives, writing book reports, and "work" in general because of the humdrum nature of the post-reading assignments.

On the other hand, the students who enjoy some kind of interaction with print through writing seem to enjoy the quality of the activities.

Many of the children indicated that they hate looking up words in the dictionary. There could be several reasons - their vocabularies are very limited, they have not been taught how to use the dictionary and/or they do not know how to use the context to find word meanings. Possibly they do not know that they don't have to understand and enjoy a reading selection.

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS

Students indicated overwhelmingly (126) that they liked the kind of reading class in which they read and talk about what was read whereas only 46 preferred to read with no discussion at all.

Students seem to be equally willing to write answers to questions as to tell answers orally. They are apparently well conditioned to reading and responding with paper and pencil. Seventy-six percent responded that they are required to answer questions most or every time after they have read. Fifty-one percent apparently feel comfortable enough to ask their own questions most of the time or every time that they don't understand something they have read.

More students indicated that they would like to have someone read to them than those who unequivocally indicated that they would not like that. The "maybe" responses are interesting because they can be interpreted to mean several things:

Maybe, if you read something interesting

Maybe, if you do it so that I won't look like a baby

Maybe, if everyone else said that they would like it too

It is difficult to form conclusions about the children's favorite books. Their tastes vary just as adults' do. Much also depends upon which books have been made available to them. I suspect that the students in general do not go out of their way to seek books. Note that many wanted library books in their reading classrooms and yet both of these schools have libraries with lending programs.

The children who responded that the old children's stories were still their favorites might not have read anything for pleasure since the second grade. One thing is certain-their tastes are eclectic. One would wonder why more of the common 'young adult' books were not cited, however.

About 3 students suggested that the school institute two periods each day in which everyone in the school would be required to sit and read anything they wanted to read. Students in the first survey were consistent with the second group in indicating that they wanted library books in the reading classrooms. I suggest, therefore, that reading teachers take every step possible to acquire classroom libraries with books of all subjects, lengths, and levels of difficulty which students may read in class and borrow to take home. Some ways of building class libraries are: raise money individually or as a teacher group to purchase books through bake sales or elephant sales; request money of parent-teacher associations or local school boards; put up requests in real estate offices, apartment buildings, supermarkets, high school and college campus bulletin boards, and Haunt Garage Sales and Used Book Stores. An excellent method of acquiring a good classroom library is through participating in weekly reader-type book clubs. I recommend building a library book free-reading period into the reading class schedule.

I also suggest that reading teachers should find out the interests of their own students-particularly if they are reluctant or remedial readers. Ramona Frasher (1978, p. 67) says that there is a "positive correlation between children's interest in and their comprehension of what they read."

As stated above, I highly recommend building into the reading schedule time for the children to read with pleasure - time to read without testing and without plugging students into a specific skill. Frasher says that teachers can't limit reading instruction to "the prescription of activities based on skill deficiencies" and expect to see improvement.

In response to the question, "Which subject do you most like to read about?" Thirty-one percent of the children like to read about teenage problems, 22.1% like sports topics best, and 20% like mysteries best. Fourteen percent like to read about people's lives. Beyard-Tyler and Sullivan found that students in grades 7, 9, and 11 prefer stories with positive endings and problem-solution themes. Topics selected for your students to read should also consider these facts.

Our surveyed students liked reading in general but became bored when constantly asked to read and answer questions on paper or when they had to sit and listen to the teacher talk for long periods of time. Boettcher (1978) supports my recommendation that students be involved in a variety of activities which include provision for vocabulary development, improvement and strengthening of comprehension skill, and free reading time. Students do not enjoy sitting and plowing through skill kits and boxed. My questionnaire shows that the student respondents have been using these materials since they were in first grade and they are still remedial readers. This conventional resource room approach does not provide the many language development activities which the students need.

Haggard (1979) supports this convention also by saying that

students with 7 to 12 years of 'failure' behind them need more interaction than an "auto-instructional" setting offers. I have the sense that although the students are well aware that they are not functioning on grade level, they would dearly like to feel better about their accomplishments, and they are motivated. The missing ingredient is the spark of excitement which immersion in the study of language can generate. The titillation of doing many language-related things and the satisfaction of enjoying them are missing. Student respondents have said that they would like to have newspapers, magazines, games, puzzles. They have told us that they like mysteries and sports stories. The next step is for us to provide these things. Elliott and Steinkellner (1979) conducted a study and found that students from both the suburbs and urban areas liked newspapers, magazines, books about hobbies, jobs, and mysteries.

I recommend that students be encouraged to develop their speaking, listening, and reading language skills in secondary school remedial reading class. They can make dioramas, book jackets, conduct interviews, participate in panel discussions, write skits to be acted out in reading class, and do choral reading. Alan Purves writes that teachers must be concerned with "language and writing and speaking, and literature, and reading, and drama, and culture, and listening." (1981, p. 74).

The eclectic approach using language to interpret language is recommended here. Specific skills should be developed such as word attack skills but students should also engage in other language arts activities in the remedial reading classroom. For example, why can't students be encouraged to write short stories for lower

grade children on the elementary school level? There is nearly always one child who sits in the back of the room and does nothing but draw. That child could be encouraged to illustrate the stories if she/he contributes to the writing of a story. Students are so conditioned to seeing questions at the end of every reading selection that they can be encouraged to write a separate set of questions to accompany each story. After the stories are typed and reproduced, they should test each other on their own questions. The aim is obvious. This project can be extended as far as the teacher and class wish.

Speaking of questions, I have long been intrigued by the 'natural readers' - children who simply learned to read on their own and who have no problems had some common experiences: In addition to being surrounded by books, they had people who were willing to sit and read to them. They had models. Also, they were rarely, if ever, asked comprehension questions at the end of a good story. The children themselves asked the questions and the loving storyteller answered the questions. I recommend periods in which these things happen in the reading classroom:

1. teachers read to the students
2. some students listen to audio tapes on which teachers have dictated stories
3. students are given short reading passages and are asked to write 3 questions which they would like to have answered about the passage.

(one of my reading teachers had assigned remedial college readers to write a question about the following sentence:

"Gene Splicing is an unparalleled exploratory tool for examining, and in the process changing, the complicated machinery of heredity."

A student wrote, "Who is Gene Splicing?")

Giermak (1980) says that one advantage of reading aloud to students is that it improves their attitude toward books. She told her secondary school students that she was reading to them to train their listening skills. Other ideas can be found in "Twenty-Two Sets of Methods and Materials For Stimulating Tennage Reading in The Journal of Reading, May, 1978, pp. 735-741. By Mason and Mize.

Students should be taught to use the dictionary with skill so that they won't dread having to use it. Some interesting strategies can be found in "The Dictionary: A Look at 'look it up' by Don R. Jones, Journal of Reading, January, 1980, pp. 309-312. Students must also be taught how to figure out unknown meanings by using context clues. Finally, since students enjoy expanding their vocabularies and want this, plan varied vocabulary-building activities. Each time a new word is discussed in class, write it and the date on a piece of paper or a large file card and tack it up onto the wall. During the first five minutes of each period, drill the students on these words through games. A list of the "1,000 Base Words of Highest Frequency in the American Heritage Computerized Study of the Vocabulary of Published Materials Used in Grades 3 Through 9 in the United States" can be found in The Reading Teacher, April, 1979, pp. 805-812. M. Jerry Weiss has compiled a bibliography of readings for secondary school students which provides a novice teacher with an excellent set of references. He has also a bibliography of books for teacher and a book, Reading in the Secondary Schools, The Odyssey Press, Inc., New York which is a collection of readings on the secondary school. A book entitled, Black Literature for High School Students by Stanford and Amin, NCTE, 1978, contains a chapter on adolescent literature.

Most important, however, before planning any activities for classes, remedial reading teachers are urged to survey their own students. You will probably find that children do not differ radically in their tastes or you may find that the students you have this semester have some unique aversions or preferences. The idea is to find out so that you can serve your students in a way which will promote maximum learning.

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